



Hamas: Khaled Meshaal

This interview was conducted in an undisclosed location in Beirut under intense security.

Mr Meshaal spoke in Arabic and his text has been translated to English. This transcript was done from a vhs recording of the interview. We have made every effort but cannot guarantee total accuracy.

TIM SEBASTIAN'S INTRODUCTION

I'm in the Lebanese capital, Beirut, at the end of an extraordinary day for HARDtalk. We were invited here to meet the leader of the Palestinian group, Hamas, labelled by Europe and America as one of the most dangerous terrorist organisations in the world. Its leader had come here specially from Syria amid meticulous security. We had to change cars, and locations, we ended up travelling in a van that had sealed windows to an undisclosed location. So when we finally caught up with the man in the wake of the assassination of his spiritual leader, Sheikh Yassin, which way is the movement, Hamas heading?

HARDTALK TITLES

TIM SEBASTIAN - Khaled Meshaal. A very warm welcome to the programme. In the wake of the Israeli assassination of Sheikh Yassin, is Hamas planning yet another cycle of pointless revenge violence?

KHALED MESHAAL- In the name of God the Compassionate, the Merciful. Bloodshed in Palestine is going on because of the Israeli crimes before and it didn't begin after the assassination of Sheikh Ahmed Yassin. The Zionist crime requests a Palestinian response. This is something very ordinary. This reciprocity is acknowledged by all human and spiritual laws and legislations.

T S - Where does it get you? Where does it get you, this retaliation? It doesn't change anything. It doesn't get you anywhere does it? More people die. More of your people die, more Israelis die. No progress is made. Haven't you got anything else to offer to the process?

KM: Our goal is to end the occupation and not kill people. If the world was able to be fair with us and give us back our land and rights, we won't need anymore fighting and resistance

TS- And when you take this revenge and you see the bodies of Israeli women and children on the streets, does that make you feel better?

KM: We feel better when the occupation ends. We hope that no blood will fall in Palestine but the one who began with aggression is the one to be held responsible for it. Sheikh Ahmed Yassin was a religious cleric paralysed and despite that, he was targeted by Zionist missiles which are American weapons. The Palestinian people have the right to respond to this aggression.

TS- Sheikh Yassin is a man who ordered killings of civilians - Israeli civilians. You can hardly complain when in a war he himself is killed can you?

KM: Sheikh Ahmed Yassin didn't order anyone. The resistance has a military specialised wing that fights on the ground. It is a natural right.

TS - He sanctioned the killings didn't he. He sanctioned them.

KM: The resistance operations don't need anybody's decision. Every Palestinian knows his duty. Any Palestinian who sees the Israeli crimes would act normally. The military wing in Hamas like the military wings in other factions knows their duty. They are doing their job in defending their people, responding to the Israeli aggression and resisting the occupation.

TS- Mr Meshaal, you're not defending anybody are you. Your tactics are not defending your people at all. There is not one single Palestinian you can defend against Israeli attacks from F16's and from tanks, can you?

KM: We are defending our people even if the balance of power is unequal, even if the Israeli weapons are much ore superior. The Israeli occupying enemy must understand that each crime from their end would bring a Palestinian response.

TS- You target women and children. That is terrorism of the most brutal kind.

KM: We are not targeting civilians and we are not targeting children. From the beginning the Palestinian resistance was focusing on military targets and on settlers

TS- So the suicide bombs on buses aren't for civilians? The children and women who die on buses? I don't notice the suicide bombers allowing civilians off the bus before they blow it up.

KM: I didn't complete my answer. I said the Palestinian resistance focused in the beginning on military targets and on settlers. But Israel committed crimes against civilians in the Aqsa mosque in 1990 and in the Ibrahimi mosque in Hebron in 1994 against innocent civilians who were praying in the mosque.

TS- What are the conditions for a ceasefire? A new ceasefire.

KM: Let Israel withdraw first, and after that we will negotiate. This is our land this is our natural right

TS- A withdrawal to the '67 borders.

KM: We consider this positive step but we have the right in all Palestine

TS- You don't say, Sheikh Yassin said that Hamas would agree, he told a German news agency, January 9th, Hamas would agree to a temporary peace with Israel in exchange for the establishment of a Palestinian state on the basis of the 67 borders. Are you saying that doesn't stand anymore? Or it does stand. Would that lead to a permanent ceasefire?

KM: We believe in what Sheikh Ahmed Yassin said in Hamas movement. But the question is does Israel accept to withdraw? Ask the occupying side first. Let it withdraw. Let it says I am ready to withdraw to the 67 borders then ask Hamas to hold a ceasefire...

TS- I'm asking what your conditions are.

KM: I said let Israel withdraw first. It is the one that began the aggression. Let it stop occupation and then everything can be negotiated.

TS- They can withdraw but you promise nothing. You promise nothing. They must withdraw but you promise nothing.

KM: I have said what Sheikh Ahmed Yassin has said. You have quoted Sheikh Ahmed Yassin. What he said concerning the withdrawal to the '67 borders. If this happened we might have a truce with Israel. We believe in this in Hamas.

TS- There could be but you're not saying there definitely would be a truce if Israel withdraws to '67 borders.

KM: Perhaps but Israel has to withdraw first. Israel is refusing it. It didn't abide by Oslo.

TS- It's the other side that has to move first.

KM - Of course

TS- The other side has to move first. You think that's good negotiation? You think that's going to produce some results? You know very well that isn't going to produce any results. You're offering nothing in return. You want the withdrawal but you offer nothing in return.

KM: We offered positive initiatives. We proposed an initiative to put aside civilians. We proposed that Israel withdraws to the borders of 1967 and then there would be a possibility for truce between us and Israel. We offered several initiatives but Israel which is stronger militarily and is backed by America and whose crimes the world refuses to speak about refuses to withdraw. It refuses to recognise the Palestinian rights.

TS- Mr Meshaal the record is different. The record is different. You fought every attempt at peace. You fought Oslo, you were against Madrid, you even condemned the Geneva Accord, you were against the Mitchell document, the Tenet document, your organisation has been against every attempt at peace.

KM: Because those initiatives don't lead to peacemaking and the proof is the factual present. What did Oslo do? Did it achieve peace? You are saying the 67 borders. All those agreements that you have mentioned did not bring peace. On the contrary they legitimise the occupation and give it a chance for expansion. The settlements grew bigger under Oslo

TS- You want a commitment from the international community but you're not giving any commitments at all. You still have a charter dedicated to the destruction of Israel. Your charter says, Palestine in it's entirety alone is an Islamic (INAUDIBLE).An Islamic endowment. Where's the room for Israel?

KM: I want to ask you one question. Arafat gave you clear and repeated commitments and what did you do with him? Did you respect his commitments?

TS- Why are you raising the question of Arafat? You don't care about Arafat at all. In 2002 you said "If we want reform, lets start with the leadership. Most of the leaders in the PA need to be changed. What's the point of having a Palestinian Authority if it's incapable of defending it's people". You don't want the Palestinian Authority anymore than Israel. You're on the same side there aren't you?

KM: On the contrary there is no problem between us and the Palestinian authority. We are different politically but we negotiate and hold talks.

TS- There are huge problems between you and the Palestinian Authority. Huge problems.

KM: The biggest problem is between us and Israel.

TS- So why did you say that? Why say that in 2002 that you wanted them out?

KM: No not at all. This is not true. We have disagreed..

TS- You did say that. In the Daily Star newspaper in Beirut. May 2002 "What's the point of having a Palestinian Authority if it's incapable of defending its people".

KM: Yes we criticised the corruption of the Authority and its surrender of the Palestinian rights but we don't call for a struggle with the authority. We call for reforms and we ask to have Palestinian correctness on all levels and an attachment to the Palestinian right.

TS- Let's face it, this is just a power struggle between you and the Palestinian Authority. You want to push them aside don't you? They offered you a place in the government, you turned them down. They offered you the hand of cooperation, you turned it down . You don't want the Palestinian Authority anymore than the Israelis do.

KM: No, don't put us on the same side with the Israelis. The Palestinian Authority was mistaken when it bargained on the Palestinian rights and when it made mistakes and was hit by corruption. We stood against this because this was against the interest of the Palestinian people.

TS- So you condemn them? You condemn them and then you're prepared to do business with them at the same time? The two don't go together.

KM: To tell them they are mistaken doesn't mean to be in a struggle with them, I hope you understand this. We might disagree with them in the political point of view or program but that doesn't mean a struggle.

TS- Dalal Salama, a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council, member of the West Bank Fatah committee, said on January 7th, "The differences today between PA and Hamas are deeper than they appear. And not just relating to Israeli/ Palestinian questions but also to the character of Palestinian decision making. Deep differences.

KM: Yes we are different politically but we agree on many other matters. We agreed about the intifada. We agreed about resistance. You see Hamas, Aqsa martyrs, Jihad factions and others, we agree on several issues. We agree on the Palestinian right but disagree in interpretations and some political programs. This is very natural.

TS- The proof of your willingness to unite with the Palestinians is the fact that you refuse to serve in Yasser Arafat's cabinet. That's the proof of your intention isn't it? Those are your real intentions.

KM: The way is not to join a cabinet where Yasser Arafat is. We have proposed to the brothers at the authority and in Fatah movement to participate in the decision making, we are one people, common factions in the intifada and resistance and it is our right to participate in decision making. This is the democracy that you want in Europe and that America wants.

TS- If you believed in democracy, if you yourself believed in democracy, why do you get your money from countries, go to countries that have no democracy whatsoever to finance you? Like Saudi Arabia, like Iran, like Syria, not one jot of democracy. What do you care about democracy if you go to these countries?

KM: First we are practicing democracy and consultations inside Hamas by ourselves. Second we are not taking any money from countries. We are taking money from people. And the people are the ones who elect and give decision and legitimacy and give us money as well.

TS- Five million dollars from Saudi Arabia.

KM: Give me the proof. Do you have any proof?

TS- Do you deny it? Do you deny it?

KM: I don't deny anything that does not exist.

TS- You were a guest of King Fahd in Riyadh two years ago. You were personally hosted by King Fahd in Riyadh two years ago.

KM: We are visiting the Arab countries and meeting with Arab leaders because they believe in Hamas line and in the resistance movement and stand by the Palestinian right. But that doesn't mean that we took money.

TS - The EU needs you to denounce violence otherwise they can't help you. They're not going to help you.

KM: The Palestinian resistance is not terrorism neither violence, and therefore we can't surrender our rights.

TS- You're the only one with that view Mr Meshaal. You're the only one who thinks that.

KM: Do you think I am the only one? What about those people who are resisting occupation and condemning Israel and America? Do you know that 43% of the American people consider the US the biggest danger to world peace? There is an international terrorism led by the US and Israel.

TS- A lot of people may be criticising Israel but they're not supporting you. Just because they criticise Israel doesn't mean they support you.

KM: It is enough for me that Arab and Islamic people support us and stand with us and all the free people in the world stand with us and a part of the international official position that supports Israel and shuts up on its crimes is a part of the hypocrisy of this phase. I tell you that Israel will be a burden for you in Europe and a burden even for the US.

TS- You accuse the West of contradictions but look at your contradictions. You say you want democracy in the region, so it's in your interests that America should succeed in Iraq because if Iraq is democratic, then that's presumably what you want so why do you have Abdul Aziz Rantissi, your representative in Gaza, calling for the creation of martyrdom cells in Iraq so that more people can blow themselves up and sabotage the democratic process. Why?

KM: leave Dr Abdul Aziz Rantissi and look to the Iraqi people. Did the Iraqi people accept the US democracy?

TS - I'm asking you why Hamas is not supporting the democratic process in Iraq. That's what I'm asking you. Mr Meshaal, you know perfectly well that this is first chance at democracy the Iraqis have had in decades. They had no chance whatsoever when Saddam Hussein was the leader. This is their first chance. Why don't you do everything you can to help them instead of sabotaging?

KM: What the US is doing in Iraq is not democracy. It is an occupation and there are killings right now.

TS- Do you speak for the Iraqi people?

KM: What is going on in Iraq is not our business. We don't participate in its failure or success. But what is happening in Iraq is not democracy and the proof is that you should go to the Iraqi people and do a survey. Do they accept the US occupation? Do they believe in the US pretended democracy? They do not. The Iraqi people don't trust the US promises and don't trust its democracy. We, as Arabs and Muslims, have a long history in democracy.

TS- Do you speak for the Iraqi people?

KM: I don't speak in their name. I just tell you go to the Iraqi people and ask them. You will hear the true Iraqi position.

TS- What if it succeeds. If democracy succeeds in Iraq, will you apologise?

KM: I hope democracy would succeed. But I tell you no democracy will succeed with the US tanks. The democracy succeeds when...

TS- The voice of doom from Hamas? The voice of doom? Haven't you got anything better to offer than that? No more encouragement than that "It's not going to succeed"? You want the failure, don't you? You want it to fail because the Americans are involved in it. That's why you want it to fail.

KM: Do you want to tell me that the problem in Iraq is caused by Hamas movement? The problem in Iraq is much more complex.

TS- The Israeli's are going to withdraw from Gaza. They say they are going to withdraw. Are you going to allow this to happen peacefully? Are you going to work in cooperation with the Palestinian Authority or make trouble at Gaza?

KM: When Sharon declared that he will withdraw from Gaza, who escalated the violence? Did we or did they? Who killed Sheikh Ahmed Yassin? When did the Apache helicopters assassinate Sheikh Yassin? Wasn't it after Sharon had promised to withdraw from Gaza?

TS- Will you work with the Palestinian Authority? Will you cooperate with the Palestinian Authority?

KM: Yes we will cooperate with the Authority and with Fatah and all the factions. We agreed on a very clear title. We are partners in the decision making and partners in managing Gaza after the Israeli withdrawal

TS- And when the PA condemn suicide bombing, you will just turn away? You won't listen to them. You're not going to obey them are you?

KM: Don't interfere in our internal Palestinian matters, we can agree. The problem is not between us as Palestinians. It is not between Hamas and Fatah or Hamas and Arafat. The problem is between us and Israel. Stop the Israeli aggression; oblige Israel to withdraw from our land

TS- Your problem Mr Meshaal is that the Palestinian Authority is telling you to stop the suicide bombings but you won't do it. That's not an internal problem. That belongs to the rest of the world.

KM: I tell you when the authority asks Hamas or any other faction or Aqsa martyrs to stop it, it knows that the problem doesn't lie in this side, the problem is with Sharon. We stopped several times. We presented more than one truce

TS- You're avoiding the question.

KM: I am not avoiding it. I am answering you. I am saying the problem is not with us. We presented more than a truce. Last year in Cairo we have declared a truce that lasted for 50 days, who destroyed it? Sharon.

TS- How are they supposed to trust an organisation that still has a charter that's dedicated to the destruction of Israel? When you renounce that, when you get rid of that charter, maybe you can create some trust. Why should they do business with someone who is dedicated to destroying them on paper?

KM: If he doesn't trust us how do you ask me to trust him? He is occupying my land and killing my children and destroying houses and stealing lands. He is practicing killings and assassination everyday. Then Arafat gave them such declarations and positions and despite this they didn't stop. Didn't Arafat take those positions? And despite this Arafat doesn't have their confidence.

TS- Answer me just one question. Does Israel have the right to exist in peace? Do you acknowledge the right of Israel to exist in peace?

KM: We consider Palestine our land and this is our natural right and the occupation must end. Occupation cannot be divided.

TS- Answer the question, yes or no, does Israel have the right to exist? It's a very simple question.

KM: I am saying we have the right to our land and we have the right to be freed from occupation. Any occupation even if time goes by doesn't become legitimate.

TS- So the answer is no. Israel does not have the right to exist. That's what you're telling me.

KM: The occupation doesn't become legitimate even after a long time. You are talking about a fair and comprehensive peace. The Palestinian who was forced to leave his land in Haifa and Jafa, if he doesn't return to his land, how do you say this is fair? Why do you stick to your rights in Europe and the whole world while you ask us to drop ours?

TS- So Israel does not have the right to exist. Let's just clarify this once and for all. You're saying Israel does not have the right to exist.

TS- So you're not going to answer my question. Let's just clarify that for the sake of the viewers, you're not going to answer my question because it's too difficult.

KM: This is not difficult. I answered in the spirit of the situation. Occupation must end regardless of the duration. Therefore, it is our right to hold on to our land.

TS- How can anyone negotiate with people who will not give a straight answer to a straight question? How?

KM: Didn't you understand my answer?

TS- I don't think the rest of the world will understand.

KM: People will understand it. I am asking you one question. Before 1948 what was happening on the land of Palestine? There were a people living peacefully on its land.

TS- Mr Meshaal, you want to go backwards when the rest of the world wants to go forward. You always go back.

KM: I am telling the truth, if you want to deal with a present situation you must look to its roots.

TS- Mr Meshaal, you came from Syria to do this interview here in Beirut and a lot of people might expect that you would have something new to offer. Something apart from just the same old cycle of violence. Do you really have nothing new to offer to this process?

KM: I will summarize very clearly Hamas position. First to adopt it in Europe and oblige America to do so. It consists of putting aside civilians in the struggle. If you were pitying the circle of killings in occupied Palestine oblige Israel to accept to put aside civilians in the struggle from both sides.

TS- Put aside the civilians as a first step.

KM: I am telling you let us stop the bloodshed from both sides. Let us put aside civilians in the struggle and let it just be between resistance from the Palestinian side and the Israeli forces and settlers. You are refusing this. When you are refusing our initiative to put aside civilians, you are allowing continuing the bloodshed. Why do you want to make pressure just on us and you can't do any pressure on Israel?

TS- And the second step?

KM: After that if Israel is convinced and sees the necessity to withdraw from the occupied territories, then this is a good step and then I would think the violence and killings in the region would stop even for a period of time, then coming generations would continue their own vision. But at least let us do a first step. Let us stop the struggle between civilians, let Israel withdraw first then tell the Palestinian people we gave you a state.

TS- Khaled Meshaal. Thanks for being on the programme.

HARDTALK END CREDITS

HARDtalk can be seen on BBC World at 03:30 GMT, 08:30 GMT, 11:30 GMT, 15:30 GMT, 18:30 GMT and 23:30 GMT

It can also be seen on BBC News 24 at 04:30 and 23:30

Story from BBC NEWS:
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/programmes/hardtalk/3639093.stm>

Published: 2004/04/19 11:01:45 GMT

© BBC MMVIII